MILITANTS SEIZE MECCA:
THE EFFECTS OF THE 1979 SIEGE OF MECCA REVISITED

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Introduction

The siege of the Grand Mosque at Mecca by Juhayman al-Utaybi is one of the most significant events in the history of Islamist dissident movements.[i] However, thirty years later, it remains one of the least understood. This is partially due to the media blackout imposed by the Saudi government and that regime's ability to control discussion of the topic. Furthermore, a key problem has been the persistent lack of primary sources. Research on the topic has evolved over the years, including two major works that have revealed both the background of the attack and the details of the event itself in great detail.[ii] An ongoing gap in the literature is a discussion of the influence of al-Utaybi's group on later movements, as well as a concise retelling of the event that does not consistently link the siege to the growth of al-Qaeda. The following research project focuses on details of the attack itself and sheds light on the movement's later influence both in ideology and strategy.

This research will be divided into three parts: the background to the siege, the actual event and Saudi response, and the findings which will shed light on the continuing influence of the incident on later movements.[iii] The first section reveals that al-Utaybi's movement was a product of Saudi socio-political culture, but was not directly linked to any other pre-existing movements. The second section recounts the attack in detail and dispels some popular myths regarding it, including the participation of Pakistani forces. The final section sheds light on the enormous and varying impact of this event throughout history and to the modern day.

Background to the Siege

The Al-Saud regime has consistently presented itself as protector of the Islamic faith, implementing strict Islamic principles in the Kingdom and abroad. From the beginning, the Saudi regime co-opted the Wahhabi clerical establishment,[iv] making it an integral part of the regime's power base, and using its religious legitimacy to ensure stability for the al-Sauds and to silence dissent.[v] Partially as a result of this legitimacy, and partially as a result of the tight reins that Saudi security forces have kept on that society, there have been few examples of violent Islamist opposition to the Saudi throne since its establishment in 1902, apart from the *Ikhwan* movement in the 1920s.[vi]

Following this major revolt, the al-Saud regime was free from significant domestic opposition, apart from a few secular movements. The introduction of modern technology during the oil era combined with the presence of secular opposition movements created a sense of anxiety amongst conservative religious groups. The resulting environment was favorable for the development of organic Islamist groups in the Kingdom.[vii] Growing Islamic sentiment combined with rapid modernization resulted in the growth of a pietistic, isolationist *salafi*[viii] movement within Saudi Arabia. Al-Utaybi's followers came from this movement and formed a group, referred to as *Al-Jami'a Al-Salafiyya Al- Muhtasiba* (JSM).[ix]

This group formed in poorer neighborhoods of Medina in 1966, in response to socio-economic changes caused by rapid modernization and urbanization as a result of the oil boom. In particular, the presence of the American oil company ARAMCO on Saudi soil, and the resulting American and European communities, created resentment amongst many Saudis. The organization was driven by the belief that the mainstream schools of Islamic thought, including Wahhabism, needed to be purified of innovations and misperceptions and also sought to counter other political Islamist groups.[x] Al-Utaybi and his followers saw themselves as protectors of traditional Saudi society from the offensive influence of Westernization. At this stage, JSM was not anti-government, but rather anti-Westernization.[xi]

Like many Saudi religious groups, the JSM itself was not a political movement, but its ideology certainly had political ramifications. Because of the intersection of religion and politics in Saudi society, deviant groups criticizing the Wahhabi establishment are at the same time attacking one of the fundamental bases of the monarchy's claims to legitimacy. Tensions between the clerical establishment and JSM reached their peak in 1977 when senior scholars visited the group in order to confront them about some of their unusual practices.[xii] Following this meeting, the JSM was split between the older and younger members of this group.[xiii] Al-Utaybi belonged to the latter and represented those who insisted on continuing their activities regardless of what the traditional leadership thought.[xiv] This movement was thus forced underground, allowing al-Utaybi to hijack its cause.[xv]

Al-Utaybi formed a new group, called simply the *Ikhwan*. Like the original *Ikhwan* movement, al-Utaybi's movement criticized the Saudi regime for putting an end to *jihad* and using religion as a means to justify their world interests.[xvi] Ideologically, however, the group differed from the original *Ikhwan* in many respects, namely its commitment to *salafi* rather than the traditional Wahhabi thought. This allegiance was made clear both in his public address on the day of the siege and in a compendium of letters that circulated secretly throughout both Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, where the JSM had gained a significant following. [xvii] "We owe obedience only to those who lead by God's book. Those who lead the Muslims with differing laws and systems and who only take from religion what suits them have no claim on our obedience and their mandate to rule is nil."[xviii]

Al-Utaybi's movement differs significantly from traditional militant Sunni thought on an important level: the declaration of the *mahdi* and taking refuge in the Grand Mosque. While most Islamic ideologies believe in the *mahdi* in some capacity, the manner in which al-Utaybi's movement declared the *mahdi* is offensive to most Sunnis because the *hadith* which explain the arrival of the *mahdi* details the specific requirements for his appearance, background, and the way in which he will be declared *mahdi*. Specifically, the arrival of the *mahdi* cannot be planned. Apart from this, there is a specific *hadith* stating that the first man to declare himself *mahdi* and take refuge inside the Grand Mosque will be killed. [xix]

While many scholars claim that the Saudi security establishment was unaware of al-Utaybi's group, it is clear that the authorities had actually been keeping tabs on al-Utaybi since his split with the JSM. Indeed, in December 1977, Saudi police raided al-Utaybi's headquarters; al-Utaybi himself escaped to seek refuge in the desert but thirty of his followers were detained. However, the threat that this group posed to the monarchy was not clear until al-Utaybi successfully stormed the holiest site in Islam, highlighting the monarchy's inability to live up to its self-proclaimed duties as Custodian of the Holy Sites.

Seizure of the Mosque and Government Response

In preparation for the day in which the *mahdi* would allegedly arrive on earth to wage war for Islam's holy of holies, al-Utaybi and his followers began to stockpile weapons and confirm the participation of members of his organization. The attack was scheduled to occur on New Year's Day of the year 1400 according to the Islamic calendar, a day which has special significance amongst many messianic groups. By the day of the siege, al-Utaybi had between 300 and 500 militants to aid in the storming of the mosque.[xx] In addition, for a bribe of 40,000 riyals members of the Grand Mosques's guard service allowed members of the group brief access to the underground chambers of the mosque, the Qaboo. Using this access, al-Utaybi packed weaponry, ammunition and supplies of food into pickup trucks that were driven into the Qaboo for use during the siege.[xxi]

The *hajj* pilgrimage season had recently ended, and the holy site remained more crowded than usual with around 50,000 pilgrims preparing to recite the morning prayer. The special significance of New Year's Day of a new century could also account for the high number of visitors to the mosque that morning.

As is customary, worshippers slept in the mosque's many rooms, and carried many of their belongings with them. Many pilgrims bring the coffins of their recently-deceased relations to the mosque so that the Imam can bestow on the dead a final blessing in the most sacred place in Islam. However, on this particular morning, many of these coffins contained more pernicious materials including a variety of automatic rifles, bullet belts and many pistols.[xxii]

As the Imam of the Grand Mosque, Mohammad Ibn Subeil,[xxiii] performed his ablutions and prepared to recite the morning's first prayer, the insurgents prepared their weapons for the greatest siege on the Grand Mosque in Islamic history. At 5:25 a.m. the sound of gunfire reverberated through the halls of the mosque, putting an end to any sense of tranquility in the building and the Saudi kingdom for several weeks. While the rebels took up their positions around the mosque, including snipers in the minarets, all of the mosque's unarmed guards were quickly shot and some worshippers were killed in the crossfire.[xxiv] Meanwhile, al-Utaybi emerged to seize the mosque's microphone from Ibn Subeil. The crowd rushed to exit the building, only to find all of the gates chained shut.[xxv]

Over the loudspeakers, al-Utaybi gave military orders to his followers to ensure that the mosque was securely locked down before declaring his goals. Al-Utaybi, first declared that their authority extended across Mecca, Medina and Jeddah before handing the microphone to the brother of the alleged *mahdi*, Mohammad Abdullah al-Qahtani.[xxvi] For the next hour, the brother of the *mahdi,* Sayid al-Qahtani spoke to the crowd in classical Arabic, declaring that the messiah had arrived to save the world from its wicked, corrupt ways. In particular, the speech focused on the illegitimacy of the Saudi ruling family and the poison of Western influence. Furthermore, the militants claimed that the oath of *bay'a* (allegiance) to the Saudis was no longer valid because the royal family clearly failed to uphold the laws of Islam. Following this speech, the *mahdi* himself took center stage to receive the *bay'a* from the militants. Most hostages were allowed to leave, although others, especially Saudis, were held as hostages throughout the siege. Prince Abdullah estimated that the number of hostages held during the entire siege to be around 1,000 in a communication with American Ambassador West. [xxvii] In another communication, West was informed that hostages in the mosque were not being harmed or threatened.

A few hours later, the Mecca police finally responded to the siege, only to be met and killed by sniper gunfire from the tops of the minarets.[xxviii] As many prominent royal family members were unavailable, the task of saving the mosque and Saudi legitimacy fell on the interior minister Prince Nayef and defense minister Prince Sultan. Soon, trucks of Army and National Guard soldiers rolled into Mecca, taking positions around the holy site. Officially, the Special Security Forces under the direction of the Ministry of the Interior were put in charge of restoring calm in the mosque.[xxix] Furthermore, the authorities constructed roadblocks around the Kingdom, and shut down all communication with the outside world.[xxx]

Because of the media blackout, there is a wide array of grossly inaccurate reports from around the world. The efficacy of the siege seemed to indicate participation of outside actors, and the newly-established Iranian regime and the American media accused one another of meddling in Saudi affairs. The Iranian and Syrian accusations were particularly inflammatory, in that any non-Muslim is strictly prohibited inside Mecca let alone the Holy Mosque itself. Indeed, these accusations of an American siege– or backing a siege– on Islam's Holy of Holies led to

widespread Muslim revolts around the world, the most destructive and shocking being on the American embassy in Islamabad, Pakistan.[xxxi] These attacks were reportedly a result of rumors that the Americans and Israelis had sponsored the siege on the Grand Mosque as a counter-attack to the hostage crisis in Tehran.[xxxii] There were similar violent protests and attacks on American interests across the Muslim world.

On the morning of November 21, the Saudi Interior Ministry finally issued its official statement on the situation in the Mosque, saying "A group of renegades carrying arms and ammunition infiltrated the Holy Mosque…presented one of their followers as the *mahdi* and called on worshippers to recognize him as such. The Saudi Authorities have asked the religious leaders for their opinion about measures to be taken to protect Muslims in the mosque."[xxxiii] This opinion from religious officials was not issued for another two days, meaning that the Saudi authorities could not yet begin their full counterattack. Because shooting inside the sacred site is strictly forbidden, the regime was forced to wait for an official *fatwa* (legal ruling) by the *ulama* before entering the mosque.[xxxiv] At a time when the legitimacy of the government was so precarious, it was essential to receive clerical permission.

The renovation which was being undertaken at the time also put the Saudis in a difficult position because the Holy Ka'ba was structurally unsound.[xxxv] Any major explosions or damage to the mosque could cause the ground underneath the Ka'ba to give way, resulting in its utter destruction. The Saudis initiated their preliminary attack involving the use of flash-bang weaponry that did not produce lethal fragments. Once the firing began, groups of commandos stormed the Peace Gate, only to be mowed down by rebel fire.[xxxvi] Following this major defeat, the Saudi monarchy was determined to continue these small-scale counterattacks. On Thursday morning, Sixth Battalion rangers managed inconspicuously to approach the Marwa Gate and affix explosives to the perimeter, blowing the gate off its hinges, and allowing access to the Marwa-Safa gallery. Here, however, they were brutally ambushed.[xxxvii]

The *fatwa*, issued on Friday November 23, stated "The *ulama* unanimously agreed that fighting inside the mosque had become permissible… If they fight you, then you must kill them because this is the punishment of nonbelievers."[xxxviii] Even after receiving the approval of the clerical establishment, the Saudis had much more severe fighting ahead of them before they could rest at ease, despite several of their own public proclamations. However, the proclamation significantly eased the difficulty of their task because it allowed them more freedom to re-take the mosque in whatever way that they could.

By the time that the Saudis were able to begin their full offensive, the rebels had strategically established themselves throughout the mosque, especially along the perimeters, in order to withstand any ensuing government retaliation. Furthermore, snipers atop the minarets could warn their compatriots of upcoming attacks as well as provide protective fire. The firing capability of the snipers is apparent in a report from three American pilots doing reconnaissance missions over the mosque. In a statement issued by the American embassy, they noted "that their helicopter drew heavy fire, including tracers, from gun positions established in the twin minarets and it appeared that the snipers possessed at least one .50 caliber machine gun…the occupiers seemed very well organized and constantly moved their gun positions…in order to hinder the aiming of return fire."[xxxix]

The Saudi military was also well-equipped with American and European military technology. On November 23, the Saudi Army brought in a fleet of armored personnel carriers (APCs) and artillery support. The Saudis' primary goal was to eliminate the snipers using missiles known as TOWs (tube-launched, optically tracked, wire guided). These missiles were

meant to be used on tanks and were able to easily put an end to the rebel sniper fire, allowing the Saudis to begin their ground offensive using the APCs, which shielded them from rebel fire, although not totally as some rebels managed to toss Molotov cocktails into the cockpits of the APCs.[xl] By mid-Saturday, the armored offensive finally cleared out the Marwa-Safa gallery, opening the path to the main courtyard. The APCs drove to the main courtyard, and quickly fired into the surrounding ramparts. According to the American pilots witnessing the attack, a significant amount of damage had been done to the mosque's structure. The pilots described black smoke rising from the eastern and northwestern sides of the building as a result of the APC attacks, and a great amount of damage to the Marwa-Safa gallery. Fire engines outside of the mosque were attempting to contain the blaze and several Saudi soldiers were standing on the rooftop. While the pilots were unable to see any wounded themselves, the American Embassy received intelligence that all Jidda doctors were called in for treatment of the wounded.[xli]

As a result of their severe losses during the initial Saudi attacks, most of the remaining rebels, including both al-Utaybi and the *mahdi*, retreated into the Qaboo where they made their last stand. While trying to secure the final underground portions of the mosque, the Saudi authorities were quick to extinguish flames and prevent any further damage to the mosque's structure.[xlii]

Saudi authorities, on Saturday and Sunday, began to search out the final militants in the vast tunnels of the mosque. The Saudi government informed the American Embassy that there were 60 to 70 insurgents remaining in the Mosque's labyrinth of tunnels and an unknown number of hostages. The remaining insurgents were surviving off the small amount of dates and water that they had previously smuggled into the mosque.[xliii] The Saudi authorities, seeking to capture as many gunmen alive as possible, for intelligence-gathering reasons, and to avoid further hostage casualties, requested a large amount of tear gas and smoke-making equipment from the American government, which would be effective in the catacomb-like basement.[xliv]

By November 28, more than a week after the initial attack, Saudi officers finally felt secure enough to pose for the media, praying in front of the sacred Ka'ba at the Grand Mosque. On the same day, authorities began interrogations of al-Utaybi's operatives captured in the basement of the Qaboo. Simultaneously, raids to rid the basement of the final 25 to 30 militants continued.[xlv] In addition, according to several reports, French security forces were sent to Mecca to direct these final incursions. The Saudi authorities have kept this aspect of the assault a closely guarded secret ever since. The French commandos arrived in Riyadh on Thursday, November 29, but never actually went on a mission to the Grand Mosque itself. Their sole duty was to direct the operations of Saudi forces, which were clearly lacking in tactical capabilities, as well as an overall sense of direction. Much of this is a direct result of the lack of coherent military authority, as the Saudis were drawing forces from four separate units: the Army, the National Guard, the Special Forces, and the Security Forces, organizations that were officially under the direction of different princes. In addition to these commandos, the French government also sent large amounts of tear gas and ammunition.[xlvi]

On December 4, 1979, Saudi authorities regained control of the mosque with the guidance of the three French Special Forces officers. Juhayman al-Utaybi was captured and the *mahdi* Mohammad Abdullah al-Qahtani was killed and identified by his brother.[xlvii] Following this, the militants were captured and paraded on Saudi state television two consecutive nights.[xlviii] At the end of this siege, the final death toll for Saudi troops was 12 officers and 115 non-commissioned officers; there were also 49 officers and 402 non-commissioned officers hospitalized due to severe injuries in these attacks. As for the rebels, according to Saudi

statements, 75 rebels were killed in the siege, 15 rebel bodies were found, another 27 died as a result of injuries after being detained, the rest were imprisoned.[xlix] Prince Nayef also claimed that only 26 hostages had been killed in addition to 110 injured during the confrontation in the Grand Mosque. However, there is much doubt about these official numbers published by the Saudi government. The American Embassy cable from Jeddah notes that the hospital figures indicate that both casualties and injuries were much higher than stated, especially amongst the Saudi military.[l]

At dawn on January 9, 1980, 63 people were decapitated in eight cities around the Kingdom, making it the largest mass execution in Saudi history.[li] The list of those executed, included 41 Saudis, 10 Egyptians, 7 Yemenis, 3 Kuwaitis, an Iraqi and a Sudanese.[lii] However, this list of those executed does not represent the most influential members in al-Utaybi's movement, nor is it representative of the group as a whole. For example, two African Americans that remain anonymous to this day participated in the attack. Furthermore, many of those that participated in the siege were not sentenced to death but were sentenced to long prison terms.[liii] In addition to those that participated in the attack, the Saudi government also arrested many other people who had been involved in either the JSM or Juhayman's *Ikhwan* at any point.

Within a few months, Juhayman's *Ikhwan* organization was completely dismantled, although there is evidence of some followers escaping to Yemen, Kuwait, or Saudi Arabia's vast desert. The Kuwaiti branch of the movement survived and remained active throughout the 1980s, although its ideology was more akin to the original JSM.[liv]

This incident shocked the regime, which had focused its security forces on suppressing leftist dissent rather than closely monitoring religious circles. In response, the Saudi government changed its domestic policy to follow more closely the ideology of the political *Sahwa* movement. This decision truly changed the nature of Saudi society and government to the present day.

Influence in Later Movements

As protector of the two most holy sites in Islam, which attract millions of pilgrims every year, Saudi Arabia will always occupy a special position of influence in the Islamic world. In light of this, the violent Siege of Mecca resulted in a wide variety of effects. The rampant spread of demonstrations across the Muslim world protesting the seizure of the Grand Mosque shows the propaganda power of this event. While these initial reactions were based on rumors and false speculation, they also display the psychological impact that an attack on the holiest place had on Muslims around the world. This impact was not quickly dispelled, especially amongst radical Muslims. Overall, it changed the Saudi regime itself, it affected later opposition movements, and most importantly it affected Muslims worldwide and influenced later Islamist dissident movements.

The success of a few hundred militants in storming the Grand Mosque for such an extended period of time exposed serious flaws in the Saudi military and security sector. It became blatantly apparent that the Saudi government had no contingency plan to deal with armed seizures of a holy place, a serious weakness in their role as Custodians of the Holy Sites. Furthermore, this embarrassment had the potential to encourage other dissidents in the long-term, both because of the Saudi's tangible failures and because of the public questioning of their legitimacy. As a result, the Saudi government continues to strictly guard information about the movement and made many hasty reforms to silence other conservative critics.

In the wake of this massive embarrassment, the Saudi government initiated a wide array of reforms in order to temper ongoing political unrest. For instance, King Khaled and Crown

Prince Fahd put forward a plan to set up a consultative council, *Majlis al-Shura* that would act as a quasi-parliament and be made up of appointed deputies. They also proposed a 200-article document of government by-laws that has been compared to a constitution that would define the process of choosing a king. A third element of the plan focused on enhancing local government and giving regional officials more authority.[lv] The Saudi government also passed a gun-control law requiring all private weapons to be registered with the government.[lvi] In addition, the Saudis vowed to take a much harsher approach towards dissident movements of all ideologies, regardless of their size, in order to prevent similar attacks in the future.[lvii]

In analysis of the Saudi response to the attacks, it is often said that the Saudi security forces defeated the extremists, and the Saudi government adopted its ideas. Because of the ideological differences between al-Utaybi's *Ikhwan* and conservative Wahhabis mentioned above, this is not technically true. However, it is true that following this attack, the Saudi regime began to enforce a much more stringent code of Islamic law. As the moderate Saudi scholar Dr. Khalil al-Khalil describes,

> Saudi television wasn't the same Saudi television after Juhayman's attacks in Mecca. The co-education in universities between girls and boys—they were studying together—after Juhayman, the schools implemented more conservative ideas... And we can say they intimidated the government to some extent. There was a kind of tense environment that was really terrible and it continued with us for many years, and it contributes to what we are about today.[lviii]

The Saudi monarchy were not the only ones to be shocked by this event; Saudi society also drastically changed. Prior to this attack, Saudi society was conservative out of tradition rather than in the religious sense. They were using Western-style banking practices, and sending their children to schools in Europe and America. However, the siege of the Grand Mosque served as a wake-up call for many Saudis, and religious conservatism became more widespread.[lix] These changes were also part of the general Islamic revival occurring in Saudi Arabia at the time, discussed above, but this event created an environment in which the government as well as the population became more religiously conservative.

It is only in this way that the siege on Mecca can be seen as leading towards the growth of al-Qaeda: with the patronage of the Saudi state. The years following this attack were the most prosperous in Saudi history, and because of the great threat to its Islamic legitimacy, the Saudi monarchy committed a large portion of their oil money towards funding the *jihad* in Afghanistan against the Soviets, and later stood firmly behind the *jihadist* elements in Bosnia. On the home front, the Saudis established a "stick and carrot" system to divert domestic dissent. This included a widespread crackdown by the Saudi security establishment and a massive patronage system, also funded by their oil wealth.[lx] In this way, the Saudi regime was able to export radical Islamic Saudi nationals to Afghanistan, maintain their Islamic legitimacy, and avoid further Islamic dissidence at home. While this plan would later backfire with the return of the "Afghan Arabs" (those who had fought in Afghanistan), the Saudis successfully consolidated their power in the meantime.[lxi]

Despite the Saudi government's efforts to limit the repercussions of the attack on the Grand Mosque at Mecca, al-Utaybi's movement inspired and influenced other Islamist groups. First of all, the siege was influential because it was not a particularly well-planned attack or a particularly well-organized movement. "It was a rather spontaneous attack carried out by a small group of dreamers." As such, it inspired many young radicals to hope that they could achieve a similar feat.[lxii] The profound influence of this attack comes across in spite of, rather than because of al-Utaybi's ideology or strategy.

The inspirational power of this movement is revealed in the number of siege attempts in the years following the 1979 attack. At the time of the Grand Mosque siege, the belief that a group could violently overthrow a government was new amongst Islamic movements, especially *salafis*. Following this attack, *salafi* groups, as well as others began to directly confront governments deemed illegitimate. This is apparent in the assassination of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat in Egypt in 1981. The assassination was carried out by a *salafi* group, *Jam'aat Islamiyya*, with a similar rejectionist ideology as al-Utaybi's group. While there were no direct links between these groups, it is plausible that *Jam'aat Islamiyya* gained some confidence to take on the Egyptian regime after witnessing the success of al-Utaybi's group.[lxiii] While this analysis is certainly speculative, there is some evidence of links between the groups, either because of Egyptian pilgrims present at the siege or the two groups' shared ideology. There also may have been an ideological bridge between the groups because of the participation of Egyptians with al-Utaybi's movement.

Furthermore, the beginning of the *jihad* in Afghanistan, and the establishment of a radical Islamic community that went along with it, created an ideological exchange that would allow al-Utaybi's legacy to spread. Some scholarly sources cite al-Utaybi, erroneously, as the ideological precursor to al-Qaeda.[lxiv] It is clear that this is not true. One example of the many differences between al-Utaybi's ideology and that espoused by al-Qaeda is their different perceptions of legitimate *takfir*. In one of al-Utaybi's letters, like modern-day al-Qaeda leaders, he portrays the Saudi state as an un-Islamic institution. However, al-Utaybi said that declaring the rulers as individuals *kafir* was prohibited as long as they continue to call themselves Muslims. He made the important distinction between an illegitimate regime and individuals whom he refused to excommunicate. Al-Qaeda, on the other hand justifies its violent attacks on both individual and governments through *takfir*, ignoring this distinction.[lxv]

While al-Utaybi can in no way be considered the direct forefather of modern jihadist ideology, some jihadist clerics that came across al-Utaybi's teachings borrowed from the ideas expressed in his writings or tried to revive some parts of his ideology. In particular, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, a Palestinian cleric currently under house arrest in Jordan, borrowed heavily from al-Utaybi's writings and made significant contacts with members of JSM in Kuwait.[lxvi] This influence is clear in the title of one of al-Maqdisi's most famous writings: *Millat Ibrahim* ("Community of Abraham").[lxvii] Al-Utaybi, throughout his letters, focused on this idea that was first expressed by early Wahhabi scholars. The similarities to al-Utaybi's ideology extend beyond the title; in this text al-Maqdisi borrows from al-Utaybi's writings and extends his ideas.[lxviii] *Millat Ibrahim* is considered to be the constitution of *takfiris*, making it particularly influential.[lxix] Al-Maqdisi also praises al-Utaybi at the beginning of his article entitled "The Shameful Actions Manifest in the Saudi State's Disbelief." Al-Utaybi is most often cited as proof of the threat to the Saudi regime. Many radical Islamic online forums continue to praise al-Utaybi for exposing the corruption and illegitimacy of the Saudi regime.

Al-Maqdisi's admiration and references to al-Utaybi are especially influential because he is one of the most widely respected *Jihadist-salafi* clerics in modern times and his texts are some of the most widely read on tawhed.ws.[lxx] Also, al-Maqdisi is more careful than many other jihadist scholars to declare other Muslims *kafir;* he claims that any Muslim who recites the *shahada* (declaration of faith) cannot be declared apostate, and will be judged in the afterlife for their hypocrisy.[lxxi] However, al-Maqdisi's views significantly differ from al-Utaybi's in many ways, most especially in that al-Maqdisi does engage in *takfir* against Muslim governments,

particularly Saudi Arabia. Essentially, al-Utaybi's ideas continue to be pervasive in the wider *salafi* community, but altered to fit the goals of jihadist movements.

Al-Maqdisi's support for al-Utaybi also serves to disprove the assertion that the siege of Mecca was a forerunner to al-Qaeda. Al-Maqdisi, while widely read throughout the jihadist community both within and without al-Qaeda, is at times a harsh critic of the highest leaders of al-Qaeda, particularly Osama bin Laden and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Furthermore, the culture and ideological background of al-Qaeda are significantly different than the rejectionist Islam of al-Utaybi's movement. Al-Qaeda and like-minded jihadists' goals are inherently political and they became radicalized as a result of international politics rather than domestic politics.[lxxii] Al-Utaybi's discourse focused almost entirely on criticisms of the Saudi state as compared to jihadist discourse which focuses on international goals and seeks to export jihad globally. While al-Maqdisi is ideologically part of the jihadist trend, his ability to manipulate al-Utaybi's writings to fit the goals of transnational jihadist ideology reveal the deep influence that these ideas continue to have.

The only direct ideological descendant of al-Utaybi's *Ikhwan* was a small group of young Islamists in Saudi Arabia itself. The group started with only three to four members living in a small apartment in Riyadh, but later extended its influence somewhat through meetings in which a few hundred people would attend. The organization's ideology centered on the belief that society in general and state education in particular was corrupt.[lxxiii] These beliefs are also discussed frequently in both al-Maqdisi and al-Utaybi's literature. They formed this group to fill a perceived gap in the religious society in Saudi Arabia because they considered the current clerical establishment too corrupt and the *al- Sahwa* movement too political. Like al-Maqdisi, the group had similar beliefs to JSM and al-Utaybi but was more radical, especially in regards to *takfir* of the royal family and the religious establishment. The group eventually split into different factions, some becoming involved in the 1995 Riyadh bombings, others being detained by Saudi security forces, and some going to Afghanistan.[lxxiv] Al-Maqdisi's strong influence is apparent in the court case for the four young men that were convicted in the 1995 Riyadh bombing: the defendants repeatedly cited al-Maqdisi's works, especially those criticizing Saudi Arabia, as leading to their ultimate decision to complete the attack.

While many authors have noted this attack's significance, often claiming that it was the first step on the path to power of the transnational jihadist movement al-Qaeda, none focus on the strategic implications of this event. Furthermore, few give much specific evidence of the events' significance, apart from a quote from Osama bin Laden or the fact that bin Laden was in Mecca at the same time as the event, and was an impressionable young man.[lxxv] In many ways the strategic implications of al-Utaybi's attack are equally significant to their ideological implications. Following this attack, there have been several attacks on holy sites that reveal a certain amount of symmetry to the Grand Mosque attack in 1979. While in no way ideologically related to al-Utaybi's attack, a fundamentalist Sikh group carried out a strikingly similar occupation of the Golden Temple in 1984. In this situation, Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale along with a group of followers moved into the Golden Temple, protesting India's administrative power over the Punjab province. For the first few days, there was no response from the Indian government because of the religious risks of occupying the Sikh's holy site and Bhindranwale used this time to give speeches to pilgrims in the Temple. In order to prepare for the ensuing assault by the Indian army, Bhindranwale and his men began to fortify the temple. Similar to al-Utaybi and his men, Bhindranwale snuck in large quantities of arms into the Temple, under the supervision of an Indian army officer. The men also sandbagged all entrances to the Temple and

set up marksmen along the perimeter of the building. In response, the Indian Prime Minister imposed a curfew on the town and began an assault, code named Operation Blue Star, to remove the fundamentalists from the building. Much like al-Utaybi's group, during the ensuing gun fight, the militants defended the Temple with machine guns, anti-tank missiles and rocket launchers. The assault took several days and remains shrouded in mystery as to the specifics of the attack. Also like al-Utaybi, Bhindranwale and a few of his men remained holed up in the basement of the Temple for several days before the Indian army was successful in removing and killing Bhindranwale. There is no definite evidence that these events are related, as they took place in two distinct religious communities, however, the strategic similarities and the temporal proximity suggest that Bhindranwale drew on the strategic lessons learned during the Siege of the Grand Mosque.

In addition to the occupation of the Golden Temple, there have been several attacks on mosques by militants with more similar ideologies as well as strategies. For instance, a radical group occupied the Red Mosque in Islamabad in July 2007. More recently, in August 2009, a *salafi* group seeking to establish an Islamic emirate took over a mosque in the Gaza Strip. While there are situational variations, the general idea is apparent, and reminiscent of the attack on the Grand Mosque.

Conclusion

In studying effects of the 1979 Siege of Mecca, it is readily apparent that the ideological and strategic repercussions of this event are significant, although not in the way that is most commonly assumed by many scholars. Al-Utaybi's *Ikhwan* movement was not the first step on the path to al-Qaeda, but rather one of many ideological predecessors to influential *jihadi-salafi* clerics such as al-Maqdisi. Furthermore, similar to al-Utaybi himself, admirers of his ideology perceive a gap in the existing Islamist movements, and thus remain on the margins of other more widespread movements such as al-Qaeda or more political movements like *al-Sahwa*. However, many Islamist militants of a variety of ideological backgrounds borrowed from al-Utaybi's strategy in their own violent attacks around the world. In addition, the success of this siege served to change the nature of Saudi society through the government's increasingly strict enforcement of conservative interpretations of Islam. These changes significantly altered Saudi society and resulted in long-term repercussions for Saudi society and transnational jihadist movements as a whole.

Thirty years after this groundbreaking event, there is still no definitive evidence of any groups or movements who continue to espouse al-Utaybi's specifics goals, however, al-Utaybi did indeed fulfill half of the prophesy regarding the arrival of the messiah in Sunni ideology: the failure and death of a false *mahdi* which will precede the coming of the true *mahdi.* According to *mahdists*, following this impersonator, the true *mahdi* will arrive after a period of time and after a number of other prophesies are fulfilled, among them the return of Jews to the Holy Land, the establishment of an army in Yemen, the waging of *jihad* in Iraq and North Africa, the rule by an army with black flags and white turbans in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and a siege in the Levant. While there is no specific evidence suggesting the rise of the *mahdi* in the near future, transnational *jihadist* groups such as al-Qaeda have a vested interest in fulfilling these prophesies, including that of the *mahdi*. Indeed, a prominent al-Qaeda leader Abu Mus'ab Al-Suri, once stated "It is our destiny to fulfill prophesies,"[lxxvi] highlighting the possibility of a second siege on the Grand Mosque at Mecca.

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[i]Juhayman bin Muhammad bin Sayf al-Utaybi became a prominent Islamist leader in the 1970s when he was already in his forties. He was born in the 1930s to a Bedouin family in the western part of the Najd region of Saudi Arabia. Both al-Utaybi's grandfather and father were known horsemen who participated in raids both before and after the establishment of the Saudi state. Al-Utaybi was raised in a traditional Bedouin environment and had a very low level of education. Al-Utaybi spent most of his life working in the Saudi National Guard. After leaving the National Guard he attended the Dar al-Hadith University. It was during this time that he rose to prominence because of his charisma, age and tribal pedigree.

[ii]See Yaroslav Trofimov, *The Siege of Mecca* (New York: Doubleday, 2007) and Thomas Hegghammer and Stephane Lacroix, "Rejectionist Islam in Saudi Arabia: The Story of Juhayman al-'Utaybi Revisited," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 39, no. 1 (2007): 103-122.

[iii]This paper is a scaled back version of my original work. In particular, the first two parts are significantly more concise. For complete version, please contact me at marissa.allison@gmail.com.

[iv]The term "Wahhabism" in this paper will be used to differentiate the ideology of the Saudi regime and its clerical establishment from other *Salafist* ideologies. Technically, Wahhabism as an ideology is one of three branches of *Salafism*. Like all *Salafist* groups, Wahhabists' main focus is maintaining *tawhid* (unity in belief) and preserving Islam from innovation and blasphemy. However, unlike later *Salafist* groups, Wahhabis are politically loyalists, making them useful allies of the Al-Saud monarchy. Their goal is to maintain the principles of *Salafist* beliefs, rather than a focus on specifics. They reject *jihad* in most cases, and they consider themselves the ideological heirs of the Hanbali school and use *taqlid* (former rulings by members of the school) in juridical rulings; later *Salafist* groups use *ijtihad* (interpretation of the Qur'an and Sunna) in jurisprudence. In practice, the main difference between Wahhabists and other *Salafists* is that Wahhabists are traditionalists and politically conservative, while the later groups seek regime change either through political means (Progressive *Salafism*) or violent means (Jihadist *Salafism*). These definitions are based on telephone discussions with Yamin Ramzi, a former jihadist cleric (November 22, 2009). For information on the Saudi governmental system and clerical establishment see Tim Niblock, *Saudi Arabia: Power Legitimacy and Survival* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

[v]For information on the Saudi governmental system and clerical establishment see Tim Niblock, *Saudi Arabia: Power Legitimacy and Survival* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

[vi]During the 1990s, the Saudi regime came under attack by Islamist militants inspired by transnational jihadist groups such as al-Qaeda. Initially, these groups were generally small groups of extremists working independently of one another. However, in recent years, many of these groups formed the organization al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. This group considers Saudi rule illegitimate and carries out violent operations throughout the Kingdom.

[vii]Ibid.

[viii]*Salafism* refers to a Sunni Muslim interpretation of Islam whose understanding is based solely on the words and deeds of the Prophet himself and his seventh century companions. This group is broken up into three branches, the Traditionalists, which is synonymous with the Western term Wahhabism, Progressive *Salafism* and *Jihadist Salafism* . These

groups are differentiated by their political goals as well as their different conceptions of *tawhid.* All three groups believe in the three first conceptions of *tawhid*, which are *tawhid al-ruboobeeya, tawhid al-ulooheeya,* and *tawhid al-asmaa wa a-sifaat*. However the two latter branches of *Salafism* added a fourth conception of *tawhid- al-hakimiyya,* which refers to the idea that "No law is worthy but God's law." With this new *tawhid*, came the idea for radical political change and the latter two branches of *Salafism*. See footnote on Wahhabism. These definitions are based on telephone discussions with Ramzi (November 22, 2009) as well as previous research.

[ix]Hegghammer and Lacroix, 107.

[x]Hegghammer and Lacroix, 107.

[xi]Ramzi, interview.

[xii]These unusual practices included things such as a hatred for all depictions of living things, but also in praying and other rituals. For instance, they considered the condition for breaking Ramadan to be the disappearance of sunlight, rather than actual nightfall; they also did not believe that one had to remove your sandals while praying. This description is based on Hegghammer and Lacroix's description of the dispute.

[xiii]State Department Cable 032988, "Information on Mecca Pamphlets."

[xiv]Hegghammer and Lacroix, 108.

[xv]Ramzi, interview.

[xvi] US Embassy Kuwait, Cable 5422 "Juhayman's Letters."

[xvii]Abu Dharr, *thawra fi rihab makka.* (Received Electronically from Thomas Hegghammer)

[xviii]Rifat Sayyid Ahmad, *rasa'il juhayman al-'utaybi, qa'id al-muqtahimin li-l masjid al-haram bi-l makka* [Letters of Juhaman al-Utaybi, Leader of the Invaders of the Holy Mosque in Mecca] (Cairo:Madbuli, 2004).

[xix]The Sunni belief in the *mahdi* is that the *mahdi* will not have any supernatural powers, and will never claim himself to be the *mahdi.* But rather, the *mahdi* will be forced to receive the *baya'a* in Mecca. Thus, according to the *hadith*, it is impossible for the arrival of the *mahdi* to be planned in the way that al-Utaybi did so. Furthermore, the legitimacy of the *mahdi* will be proven when the army that comes to quell his resistance will be swallowed up by the ground. While al-Utaybi's alleged *mahdi*, Mohammad Abdullah al-Qahtani could claim some legitimacy based on his facial features, it quickly became apparent that he did not satisfy the requirements of the *hadith*. One essential requirement in mainstream Sunni beliefs is that the *mahdi* must be of the Hashemite line from the line of Hassan bin Ali, which Qahtani did not fulfill. These explanations are based on discussions with Ramzi.

[xx]Trofimov and several other scholars such as Robert Lacey in *The Kingdom: Arabia and the House of Sa'ud* (New York: Avon Books, 1981) list the number to be 500, but in American Embassy cables, the number is listed as being 300. U.S. Department of State, American Embassy Jidda, Cable 7993 *Conflicting Reports by American Pilots in Mecca and the Military Liaison in Jidda Office in Riyadh's Report on the Uprising,* November 21, 1979, http://www.randomhouse.com/doubleday/siegeofmecca/ pdf/7993_21 Nov1979.pdf (accessed October 27, 2009).

[xxi]Much of the account of the siege of the mosque was unclear to most historians prior to one former militant that recently agreed to interviews, by the name of Nasir al-Huzeimi. In light of geographical and political restrictions, much of the story prior to the actual siege will be taken from thoroughly researched secondary sources, such as the works by Trofimov and Hegghammer and Lacroix. Furthermore, U.S. Department of State, U.S. Embassy Jidda, Cable 8039, *Update on the Occupation of the Great Mosque in Mecca,* November 21, 1979, http://www.randomhouse.com/doubleday/ siegeofmecca/ pdf/8039_21Nov1979.pdf (accessed October 27, 2009) confirms the use of pickups to smuggle materials into the mosque. The 40,000 riyal bribe was mentioned by Prince Fahd in an interview with the Lebanese newspaper *al-Safir*, translated and published in Jeddah's Arab News, January 14, 1980, as reported in *The Siege of Mecca.*

[xxii]Trofimov 2; Series of Cables from U.S. State Department, U.S Embassy Jidda.

[xxiii]Mohammad ibn Subeil was able to blend into the crowd amongst the other pilgrims and eventually make his escape.

[xxiv]Angus Deming, Ron Moreau, Nabile Megalli, and David Martin "Mecca and the Gulf" *Newsweek* December 3, 1979, quoting Egyptian pilgrims that were at the mosque; "Saudis Promise Harsh Treatment for Mosque Assailants," Associated Press November 23, 1979; U.S. Embassy Jidda Cable 7993 *Conflicting Reports on Situation at Mecca.*

[xxv]Edward Cody, "Saudis Raid Mosque to End Siege" *The Washington Post,* November, 25, 1979, quoting interview with Subeil on Saudi television.

[xxvi]The name of this young man is particularly significant because according to messianic prophesies, the name of the *mahdi* must be the same as the Prophet himself. Al-Qahtani also displayed other traits of the *mahdi*, including having a large birth mark on one side of his face.

[xxvii]U.S. Department of State, U.S. Embassy Jidda, Cable 8428, *Prince Abdullah discusses the Mecca events with Ambassador West*, December 6, 1979 http://www.randomhouse.com/doubleday/siegeof mecca/pdf/ 8428_6Dec1979.pdf (accessed October 27, 2009) and U.S. Embassy Jidda Cable 7993, "Conflicting Reports," based on report from American helicopter pilot flying over Mecca.

[xxviii]The Globe and Mail, "Zealouts Came to Mosque with Siege with Dates, Shrouds, Arms," Reuters, November 30, 1979 and U.S. Embassy Jidda Cable 7993, *Conflicting Reports.*

[xxix]U.S. Embassy Jidda Cable 7993, *Conflicting Reports.*

[xxx]U.S. Embassy Jidda Cable 7971, *Report in the Cut in Telephone Lines.*

[xxxi] "South Asian Reaction to Siege" Report by the BBC on Karachi Radio Commentary New Delhi Home Service and dacca home service November 27, 1979.

[xxxii]Barr, "A Day of Terror Recalled."

[xxxiii]U.S. Embassy Jidda, Cable 8039, *Update on Situation in Mosque*.

[xxxiv]Reuters, "Zealots Came to Mosque Seige with Dates, Shrouds, Arms." November 30, 1979.

[xxxv]U.S. Embassy Jidda, Cable 8428 *Prince Abdullah Reports to Ambassador West.*

[xxxvi]Accounts of the casualties themselves are taken from Trofimov, 129, and accounts of the attack on the Mecca are combined from a series of American Embassy Cables discussing the attacks on late Wednesday night. Specifically, the reconnaissance pilots once again flew over the Mosque and noticed that despite the noise there was no damage to the mosque and there did not appear to be very much activity on the ground, showing that the attack was not as successful or as large as the Saudis had proclaimed it to be.

[xxxvii]This account is taken from Trofimov, 133 and is based on his interviews with surviving Saudi military that were involved in the attack.

[xxxviii]*Fatwa hayi'at kibar al-'ulama fi ahdath al-haram* [Opinions of the Committee of Senior Ulama on the Events in the Haram], Received electronically from Thomas Hegghammer.

[xxxix]U.S. Embassy Jidda, Cable 8039, *Update on the Occupation of the Grand Mosque.*

[xl]Trofimov, 152-153.

[xli]U.S. Department of State, U.S. Embassy Jidda, Cable 8095, *Occupation of Grand Mosque, Mecca: The Drama Apparently Ends*, November 24, 1979, http://www.randomhouse.com/doubleday /siegeofmecca/pdf/8095_24Nov1979.pdf (accessed October 27, 2009).

[xlii]U.S. Department of State, U.S. Embassy Jidda, Cable 8119, *Update on the Siege and Pilots Reports on Mecca*, November 25, 1979, http://www.randomhouse.com/doubleday/siegeofmecca /pdf/8119_21Nov1979.pdf (accessed October 27, 2009).

[xliii]U.S. Embassy Jidda, Cable 8039, *Update on the Occupation of the Great Mosque in Mecca.*

[xliv]U.S. Embassy Jidda, Cable 8180, *Occupation of Grand Mosque: Situation as of 1300 GMT.*

[xlv]U.S. Department of State, U.S. Embassy Jidda, Cable 8218, *Prince Bandar Outlines the Interrogation of Juhayman's Aides and Saudi Reaction*, November 28, 1979. http://www.randomhouse .com/doubleday/siegeofmecca/pdf/8218_28Nov1979.pdf (accessed October 27, 2009).

[xlvi]The highly controversial claim that the French commandos helped the Saudi government recover the mosque is told in Trofimov's book, and is based on the author's interviews with people that were actually involved, and seem to be reliable. It is also discussed in brief in Robert Lacey's *The Kingdom*, 485.

[xlvii]U.S. Department of State, U.S. Embassy Jidda, Cable 8428, *Prince Abdullah Discusses Mecca Events*.

[xlviii]Ibid.

[xlix]Statement from the Saudi Interior Ministry in regards to the attack as published by the BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, January 10, 1980.

[l] U.S. Department of State, U.S. Embassy Jidda, Cable 8429, *End of Occupation of Great Mosque.* December 6, 1979. http://www.randomhouse.com/doubleday/siegeofmecca/pdf/8429_ 6Dec1979.pdf (accessed October 27, 2009).

[li]Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon, *The Age of Sacred Terror* (New York: Random House, 2002)

[lii]U.S. Department of State, U.S. Embassy Jidda, Cable 12065, *List of Those Executed*, January 1, 1980. http://intelfiles.egoplex.com/saudi-mecca-executed.pdf (accessed October 28, 2009).

[liii]Statement from Saudi Interior Ministry Regarding the Punishment of Infiltrators, as printed in the Summary of BBC World Broadcasts, January 10, 1980.

[liv]Ibid.

[lv]Nicolas Tatro, "Majlis System Allows Saudis to Let Off Steam," Associated Press, December 2, 1981.

[lvi]Associated Press, International News Section, December 6, 1979.

[lvii]U.S. Embassy Jidda, Cable 8218, *Prince Bandar Outlines the Interrogation of Juhayman's Aides*.

[lviii]Dr. Khalil Al-Khalil, interview by PBS Staff, 2003, Frontline, PBS, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/ pages/frontline/shows/saud/themes/pivotal.html (accessed October 28, 2009).

[lix]Ramzi, interview.

[lx]Ibid.

[lxi]With the return of jihadis from the Afghan jihad, the Saudi monarchy faced new threats to their legitimacy. This is often cited as an explanation for the return of violence attacks in Saudi Arabia during the 1990s.

[lxii]Ramzi, interview.

[lxiii]Ibid. While there are no official records of this influence, Ramzi, in discussing the great influence of the Siege on the Grand Mosque, said that *Jama'at Islamiyya* surely had this incident in mind when carrying out their assassination of the Egyptian president.

[lxiv]These books include: Richard Wright, *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11* (New York: Random House, 2006); Peter L. Bergen, *The Osama bin Laden I know* (New York: Free Press, 2006); and *The Siege of Mecca* by Trofimov.

[lxv]Hegghammer and Lacroix, 117.

[lxvi]Abu Mohammad al-Maqdisi, Interview, 1998, available from tawhed.ws

[lxvii]*Millat Ibrahim* is the idea of the community of Abraham. In this writing al-Maqdisi defends the idea that Muslims are the ideological descendants and a continuation of Abraham's faith. He says that Muslims are all descendants of the creed of Abraham and that the Qur'an says that all prophets derive from that origin. He also argues that the Prophet Muhammad clearly followed the creed of Abraham. In this text, similar to that of al-Utaybi, al-Maqdisi declares that the main attributes of the creed of Abraham are to have a clear distinction between infidels and their worship. It is this book that clearly defends the fourth *tawhid* which *Salafist* groups ascribe to. See footnote on *Salafism.*

[lxviii] Abu Mohammad al-Maqdisi, *Millat Ibrahim* available from tawhed.ws

[lxix]William McCants, ed. *Militant Ideology Atlas*, Combatting Terrorism Center, U.S. Military Academy, 2006, http://www.ctc.usma.edu/atlas/Atlas-ResearchCompendium.pdf (accessed October 28, 2009).

[lxx]Ibid. While this is a relatively well known fact, and is apparent by looking at tawhed.ws, McCants compiled a chart to compare the most popular jihadist texts. Tawhed.ws is the largest online library of *Salafist* and *jihadist* texts.

[lxxi]Abu Mohammad al- Maqdisi, *nukat al-lawami' fi malhuzat al jami* [Illustrious Points: Observations on the Book al-Jami'] available from tawhed.ws.

[lxxii]Hegghammer and Lacroix, 118.

[lxxiii]Hegghammer and Lacroix, 118.

[lxxiv]BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, "Four Arrested in Connection with the 1995 Riyad bombing make statements," April 23, 1996; Hegghammer and Lacroix, 118.

[lxxv]This particular argument is made in *The Siege of Mecca* and *The Looming Tower.*

[lxxvi]Ramzi, interview (November 22, 2009).